

Proper 25, Year A 2023

[Deuteronomy 34:1-12; Psalm 90:1-6, 13-17; 1 Thessalonians 2:1-8; Matthew 22:34-46](#)

St. Clare's Episcopal Church

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Again and again we hear Jesus talk about love. It's his primary message, but no one wants to hear it.

At this point in the Gospel narrative, Jesus has entered Jerusalem for the last time before he is executed. The conversations that Jesus is having with the leaders of his own religion are getting very heated, and despite their best efforts they can't seem to outsmart him or cause him to make a mistake that costs him his leadership. Jesus is relentlessly successful in winning whatever debates they throw at him. This week's Gospel reading shows the Pharisees trying to defeat him once again.

They ask him what is the most important commandment. The first part of Jesus' answer is to quote the beginning of the Sh'ma, the oldest prayer in Judaism and one of just two prayers commanded in the Hebrew Scriptures. It is found in the book of Deuteronomy: *Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.*

In the second part of Jesus' answer he is quoting from the book of Leviticus: *You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord.*

Jesus is not only showing the Pharisees that he knows the Hebrew scriptures, he is also telling them that they are talking to a member of the family. A family which makes love of God, love of neighbor and love of self the primary family values. Jesus and those who attack him are part of the same family. They share family traits, as we talked about last week. Central to recognizing a member of this family is to see the love of God, love of neighbor, and love of self in action.

Our ancestors in the faith, the early monastic Abbots and Ammas of the 4th century, many of whom lived in the deserts of northern Africa, believed that the fundamental goal of the Christian life is really very simple. It is to learn to love in the same way that God loves. To learn to love ourselves and others in the same manner that God loves - and to learn to love God - and because it is so difficult, this learning was expected to take a lifetime.

These early fathers and mothers of our faith believed that because we are born with the image of God firmly planted in us, we all have the capacity for goodness and love from birth, but that God's image becomes distorted or damaged by sin. Our life's work, then, is to allow God to restore God's image within us and to discover how we are to realize our God-given capacity to love. This work requires ongoing attention in our lives, and is not only important for our individual lives but for the life of the world.

The desert mothers and fathers left behind sayings that are intended to help us in this goal. One of the Abbots points to a circle to help us understand how love of God and

love of neighbor are intertwined, thoroughly interdependent. At the center of the circle is God, and lines are drawn from the center of the circle out to the edge, like spokes on a wheel. He said that love of God and love of neighbor are so closely related, that the more we are able to love our neighbor, the closer we move down the spokes towards God. Likewise as we are drawn to God, the closer we are to the spokes around us. It's impossible to love God without loving neighbor; it's impossible to love your neighbor without loving God. To live in this way takes patience. Without patience for this slow growth, we become badly tuned flutes and poorly-made gongs, Paul's symbols for the absence of love.

The English language limits our understanding of the kind of love Jesus is talking about. We have one word – love – to mean so many kinds of love and feelings, from romance, to affection, to likes and wants. The kind of love that Jesus and the desert fathers and mothers want us to practice is sacrificial, truly wanting the best for the other, the neighbor we may not even know. It is the kind of love that requires us to see the image of God in every human being, everyone. It means taking actions that help bring about the best for the other. It's also learning to love ourselves just because God loves us – no other reason is needed. Love means having tremendous passion for the well-being for others, for ourselves, for God...for all of life, and acting upon that passion. A simple message and so very hard to do.

If we continue reading Leviticus beyond what Jesus quotes, we hear an admonition to be holy: don't take vengeance on others, don't hold a grudge, don't profit by the blood of your neighbor, don't slander people, don't tweet about them, don't say bad things about them on Facebook, but love your neighbor as yourself. All of life is connected, interdependent. We and our neighbor are related to one another because of the family trait of love. We are all created with the image of God in us. If we hurt them or they hurt us, the fabric of life itself is damaged. When there is war in one part of the world, we are affected. When there is a mass shooting in one part of our country, we are all harmed. When love is cut off we trust less; we fear more; we close ourselves off from other people because of a perceived risk in being open; we become self-protective rather than reaching out to our neighbors; we lose hope; we are less likely to see the image of God in the other. We are all damaged when one of us is.

But here's also a part of it. The desert fathers and mothers also had another belief. We are all on the road to perfection. Perfection is learning to love the way that God loves, and being on the road is perfection. But we'll never arrive, unlike our own idea of perfection. That means that in the great experiment of love, we will make mistakes, many of them. I may hurt or disappoint you, and you may hurt or disappoint me. But inherent in love is the capacity to say I'm sorry, to allow each other grace and mercy, and to get up and try again.

Again and again we hear that the primary message Jesus brings us is to love one another. As part of God's creation, it is the fundamental family trait that binds us and gives us the life God intends for all of creation, even when we make mistakes.

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

Love. It is a simple message and so hard to do. Patience. Perseverance. And only through the grace of God.

Amen.